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ABSTRACT

Recent models of metadiscourse proposed by Joseph M. Williams and William J. Vande Kopple are collections of disparate structures instead of principled systems--they do not contain rules to explain the interdependencies of their categories. Metadiscourse should be redefined as a category within the larger context of speech act theory. Specifically, metadiscourse consists of the elements in a sentence that convey illocutionary content in either fully or partially explicit form. By limiting the term "metadiscourse" to those constituents that convey illocutionary content, metadiscourse can become a clearly delineated category that functions within the larger context of speech act theory, thus allowing use of the research that speech act theorists have been conducting for over 30 years and providing a principled framework in which to conduct further study. (SRT)

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Abstract

Metadiscourse in Context:

A Speech Act Model of Illocutionary Content

(Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, New Orleans, LA, 13 March 1986)

The essay examines recent metadiscourse models and proposes a speech act model of metadiscourse. Beauvais argues that recent models of metadiscourse proposed by Joseph M. Williams and William J. Vande Kopple are collections of disparate structures instead of principled systems, and he proposes that metadiscourse be redefined as a category within the larger context of speech act theory. Beauvais defines metadiscourse as the elements in a sentence that convey illocutionary content in either fully or partially explicit form, and he shows how a speech act model of metadiscourse can establish a hierarchy among existing metadiscourse categories.

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As interest in text linguistics has expanded in recent years, a problem common to many fledgling disciplines has developed. Because no consensus exists concerning an appropriate framework for studying text structure, theorists have advanced competing models that reflect differing views of the parameters and internal structure of the field. Although these theorists use many of the same key terms in their textual models, the same term may denote different elements in each model.

One such term is "metadiscourse." In its brief history, metadiscourse has appeared as an element in several models of text structure; however, theorists remain divided concerning the range of constituents that should be grouped under the rubric of metadiscourse. In this essay, I will examine the major competing theories of metadiscourse, and I will argue that the existing metadiscourse models are not principled systems; instead, they are merely collections of disparate structures. I will conclude by offering an alternative model of metadiscourse--one that presents metadiscourse as a precisely defined category lodged within the larger context of speech act theory.

Because the term "metadiscourse" is unfamiliar to many composition researchers, I must provide a brief history of

work on metadiscourse; in fact, any history of metadiscourse must be brief, because the word is of recent coinage--it was first used by Zellig S. Harris in 1959. Harris was interested in designing a model for mechanically constructing abstracts of scientific articles; to do this, he first attempted to divide sentences into smaller units of information, and he categorized these "kernel units" according to the type of information they contained. One of Harris' categories is metadiscourse; he uses the word to describe text elements that comment about the main information of a text, but which themselves contain only inessential information. For example, in a sentence that reports on an important scientific discovery, the introductory clause "We have found that" would be a meta-discourse kernel (466).

Metadiscourse constitutes only a minor category within Harris' model of information retrieval, and he uses the word only four times in his published work. Furthermore, Harris lodges metadiscourse within a complex theoretical framework that is accessible only to trained linguists. Harris' ideas diminished in importance as Chomsky's transformational grammar ascended to prominence in the 1960s, and the word "metadiscourse" disappeared from use for over twenty years.

Metadiscourse resurfaced in 1981, when Joseph M. Williams published his seminal book, Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace. Williams defines metadiscourse as "writing about writing, whatever does not refer to the subject matter being addressed" (226), observing that metadiscourse is writing that guides readers without informing them (81).

Williams presents three broad categories of metadiscourse,

each of which contains two members. The first category includes hedges and emphatics, both of which express the certainty with which a writer presents material. Hedges are qualifying terms like "possibly," "apparently," "might," and "seem," while emphatics include terms like "it is obvious that," "of course," and "invariably" (83). The second category includes sequencers and topicalizers, both of which denote words that lead a reader through a text. Although Williams does not define sequencers, we can infer from his examples that these are words that explicitly indicate relationships among passages of discourse. This class includes causal connecting words like "therefore," obversative connectors like "however," illustration markers like "for example," temporal sequencers like "next" and "after," and numerical sequencers like "in the first place," "second," and "my third point is." Topicalizers are terms that "focus attention on a particular phrase as the main topic of a sentence, paragraph, or whole section" (84), and Williams cites as examples such phrases as "in regard to," "in the matter of," and "turning now to" (84).

Williams' final metadiscourse couple contains narrators and attributors, both of which tell a reader the sources of ideas, facts, or opinions. His examples of narrators include "I was concerned," "I have concluded," and "I think" (85), all of which have first person subjects. Unlike narrators, attributors use third person subjects, although all of Williams' examples are agentless passives--his examples include "high divorce rates have been observed to occur in parts of the Northeast that have been determined to have especially low population densities" (86).

Because his book is intended as a writing text, Williams

limits his discussion to practical comments concerning how overuse of his six metadiscourse types can make writing difficult to understand. He does not provide a detailed definition of metadiscourse, nor does he suggest that his list is an exhaustive taxonomy of metadiscourse categories. For a truly detailed theoretical study of metadiscourse, we must turn to the work of William J. Vande Kopple.

Vande Kopple's interest in metadiscourse is first noted in his doctoral dissertation, which contains a passing reference to metadiscourse:

> Many discourses have at least two levels. The primary level is made up of propositional content. But often there is also discourse about the act of discoursing, discourse which does not add propositional information but which signals the presence of the author. This kind of discourse calls attention to the speech act itself, often marking stages in the development of the primary discourse, displaying the author's position on the primary discourse, or molding the reader's attitude about the primary discourse. This is metadiscourse. ("EEFFSP" 50-51)

Two aspects of this definition are worth noting. The first is that Vande Kopple is drawing a clear distinction between metadiscourse and propositional content. The second is that he is relating metadiscourse to speech act theory by noting that metadiscourse signals the presence of the author and calls attention to the author's speech act. Both of these aspects are important to the analysis of metadiscourse that I will offer in the second part of this essay.

Vande Kopple's detailed discussion of metadiscourse appears in the essay, "Somr Exploratory Discourse on Metadiscourse" (CCC, February, 1985). In that essay, Vande Kopple offers a definition that again opposes metadiscourse to propositional content, but which makes no reference to speech act theory:

> On one level we supply information about the subject of our text. On this level we expand propositional content. On the other level, the level of metadiscourse, we do not add propositional material but help our readers organize, classify, interpret, evaluate, and react to such material. Metadiscourse, therefore, is discourse about discourse or communication about communication. (SEDOM 83)

Vande Kopple then asserts that "there are at least seven kinds of metadiscourse, the boundaries and internal characteristics of which will probably have to be more closely surveyed in future work" (SEDOM 83). His seven categories include the following:

1. Text connectives, which "try to guide readers as smoothly as possible through our texts and to help them construct appropriate representations of them in memory" (SEDOM 83). These include sequencers like "first" and "next," temporal or logical relators like "as a consequence" or "at the same time," reminders about material presented earlier, like "as I noted in Chapter One," statements of what material one is about to present, like "what I wish to do now," and topicalizers, like "as for" and "in regard to."
2. Code Glosses, which explain the meaning of words in the text--for example, a definition of a foreign word.

3. Illocution Markers, which identify speech acts. For example, "I hypothesize" and "to sum up."
4. Validity Markers, which express our confidence in the propositional content we convey. Vande Kopple groups three of Williams' categories under this rubric--hedges, emphatics, and attributors.
5. Narrators, another of Williams' categories. An example is "the principal reported."
6. Attitude Markers, like "surprisingly" and "I find it interesting."
7. Commentary, those remarks that are addressed directly to the reader, like "most of you will note" and "you might wish."

Williams and Vande Kopple's work constitute the most significant research on metadiscourse to date. However, I now will consider two problems in their work, and I will explain how these problems can be resolved if their metadiscourse models are reconsidered within the context of speech act theory.

As I noted earlier, when Joseph Williams resurrected metadiscourse in 1981, he did not attempt to situate the term within a rigorous theoretical framework. Instead, he used the word in a textbook discussion of concision in writing, and his discussion clearly is governed by pedagogical concerns. Williams' informal definition of metadiscourse as "writing about writing" and his presentation of six metadiscourse types are more than adequate for his purposes--they allow a lucid discussion of the need for concision. However, it is not evident that the definition and the categories should be preserved in a more extensive treatment of text structure. The categories that Williams groups

under metadiscourse possess such diverse properties that one may question why they are grouped under a common rubric. The relationship between hedges and emphatics is clear, as is that between narrators and attributors, but little of what I say concerning emphatics will apply to narrators, and little of what I say concerning hedges will apply to sequencers. Although each of the individual terms seems useful, it is not useful to group them under a common title unless they possess similar qualities.

The problem of disparate content is even more pronounced in Vande Kopple's study--his most recent definition of metadiscourse indicates five purposes that metadiscourse can serve, and his model includes seven classes and eight sub-classes under the banner of metadiscourse. Once again, the diversity of constituents makes it difficult to make meaningful statements about metadiscourse as a collective entity. What can I say that will apply equally to validity markers and topicalizers? To reminders and attributors? A possible answer to these questions is that an excess or deficit of any metadiscourse forms can make a text difficult to comprehend. However, this is true also of material that Vande Kopple would not classify as metadiscourse; an overabundance of extraneous information of any type will cause comprehension problems, as will the omission of important information. These properties do not distinguish metadiscourse from discourse, and they do not provide a practical justification for grouping disparate categories under a common rubric.

Closely related to the first problem is the fact that the existing metadiscourse models are not principled systems--they do not contain rules to explain the interdependencies of

the categories. They ignore the possibility that some forms of metadiscourse may interact with other forms in predictable patterns. For example, the attributors in Williams' model can be used to convey emphatics, as in the clause "Jones is certain that." And in Vande Kopple's model, illocution markers may convey either attitude or validity, as is evidenced by the clauses "I am surprised that" and "I doubt that." It is evident that some metadiscourse categories merit a status superordinate to that given to other categories, but neither Williams nor Vande Kopple mentions this fact.

Can metadiscourse be a useful entity? I believe that it can, but I see a need to redefine the term and to consider how the taxonomies of metadiscourse categories can be transformed into a principled system. I first would consider the problem of defining metadiscourse.

Beyond the fact that metadiscourse is "writing about writing" or "discourse about discourse," we can learn several things from the existing definitions of metadiscourse. The definitions suggest the following:

Metadiscourse is not:

--the subject matter being addressed (Williams 226)

--propositional content (Vande Kopple, SEDOM 83)

Metadiscourse is:

--writing that guides the reader (Williams 81)

--writing that signals the presence of the author (Vande Kopple, "EEFFSP" 50)

--writing that calls attention to the speech act itself (Vande Kopple, "EEFFSP" 50)

In distinguishing between metadiscourse and the subject

matter or propositional content, Williams and Vande Kopple are paralleling the distinction between illocutionary acts and propositional content that John R. Searle makes in Speech Acts:

> Stating and asserting are acts, but propositions are not acts. A proposition is what is asserted in the act of asserting, what is stated in the act of stating. (29)

Searle elaborates on the distinction between these two types of sentence elements:

> From [a] semantical point of view we can distinguish two (not necessarily separate) elements in the syntactical structure of the sentence, which we might call the propositional indicator and the illocutionary force indicator. The illocutionary force indicator shows how the proposition is to be taken, or to put it another way, what illocutionary force the utterance is to have; that is, what illocutionary act the speaker is performing in the utterance of the sentence. (30)

Given that Vande Kopple's first definition notes that metadiscourse "calls attention to the speech act," it seems reasonable that metadiscourse be redefined in a manner that utilizes Searle's distinction and lodges metadiscourse within the context of speech act theory. I would suggest the following definition:

> Metadiscourse: the elements in a sentence that convey illocutionary content in either fully or partially explicit form.

To test the implications of my definition for a model of

metadiscourse, I first would consider a common approach for conveying illocutionary content in a fully explicit manner--the use of a performative sentence. As Searle and Daniel Vanderveken note:

> A special class of elementary sentences are the performative sentences. These consist of a performative verb used in the first person present tense of the indicative mood with an appropriate complement clause. In uttering a performative sentence a speaker performs the illocutionary act with the illocutionary force named by the performative verb by way of representing himself as performing that act. (2-3)

A simple example of a performative sentence is "I believe that tax reform is necessary." Analized in terms of Searle's distinction between illocutionary force indicators and propositional indicators, the clause "I believe" is the illocutionary force indicator, while the propositional indicator is "that tax reform is necessary." Because my definition states that metadiscourse conveys illocutionary content, my metadiscourse model should describe the structure of "I believe."

To make the comparison of my model to existing models as clear as possible, I will try to retain terminology from the existing models wherever possible. For this reason, I will use Vande Kopple's term, "illocution marker," and I will consider it to be synonymous with Searle's "illocutionary force indicator." To describe the illocution marker "I believe," I present the following model:

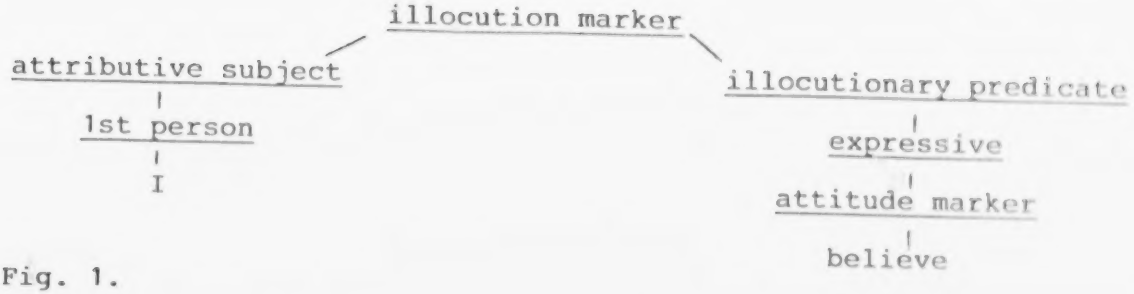

Fig. 1.

Several features of this model are worth examining. First, I would note that although the model retains the term "illocution marker," it raises that term to a superordinate category that dominates attributors and attitude markers. Instead of being merely one of several forms of metadiscourse, the illocution marker becomes a device which conveys metadiscourse. In this way, the model begins to establish a hierarchy among Vande Kopple's taxonomic terms. The category "expressive" is one of Searle and Vanderveken's five classes of illocutionary points, and it includes utterances that express feelings and attitudes (FOIL 38). In the example sentence, the illocutionary force of the verb is to express belief.

The category "validity markers" also might be grouped into the class of expressives, in which case I could expand the model as follows:

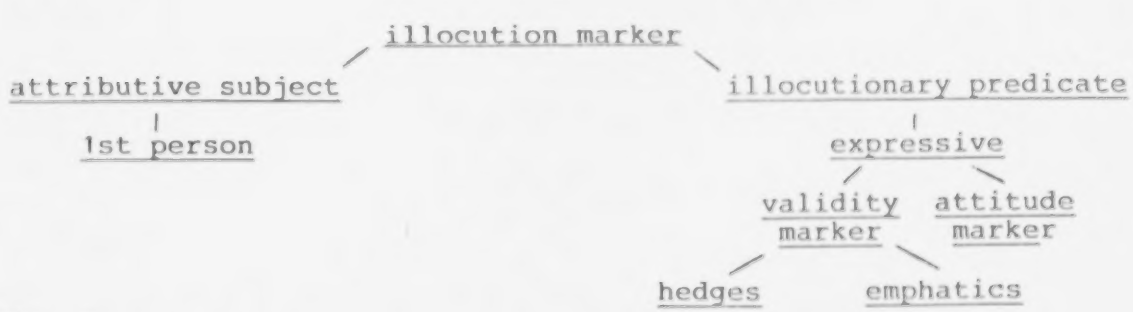

Fig. 2.

Expanded in this way, the model would describe illocution markers

like "I doubt" and "I am certain."

Another of Searle and Vanderveken's illocutionary point classes is "assertives," with which "the speaker presents a proposition as representing an actual state of affairs in the world of utterance" (FOIL 37). This class would include illocution markers like "I should note" and "I must report." These markers are similar to the "narrators" in Williams and Vande Kopple's models, but with first person subjects instead of third person. Expanded to include this class, the model appears as follows:

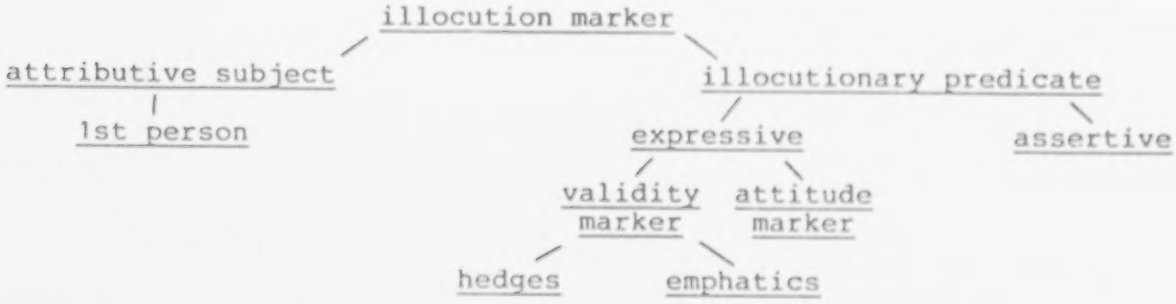

Fig. 3.

The illocutionary predicate category in my model could be further expanded to include other types of illocutionary acts; exactly how many classes of illocutionary acts are necessary remains a disputed topic. As I noted earlier, Searle and Vanderveken suggest five categories. Bach and Harnish propose four categories which are broader than Searle and Vanderveken's and which contain thirty-one sub-categories (41). Rather than addressing this question, I would note that my concern is to show that numerous metadiscourse categories can be grouped under the rubric of illocutionary predicates. For my limited purpose, the representative categories "expressive" and "assertive" are sufficient to illustrate my point.

To account for more of the metadiscourse categories in

Williams and Vande Kopple's taxonomies, it is necessary to expand the list of constituents grouped under "attributive subjects." At first glance this appears impossible to do, because most speech act theorists have limited performative subjects to first person pronouns. However, Jerrold M. Sadock has observed that some sentences present "covert illocutionary acts" by using third person subjects. Among the examples he cites are "Officer O'Brien warned us that there were several bridges out" and "My wife told me that the dog was barking" (44). (Note also that these examples contain past tense performative verbs.) These examples provide a rationale for the following expansion of my model:

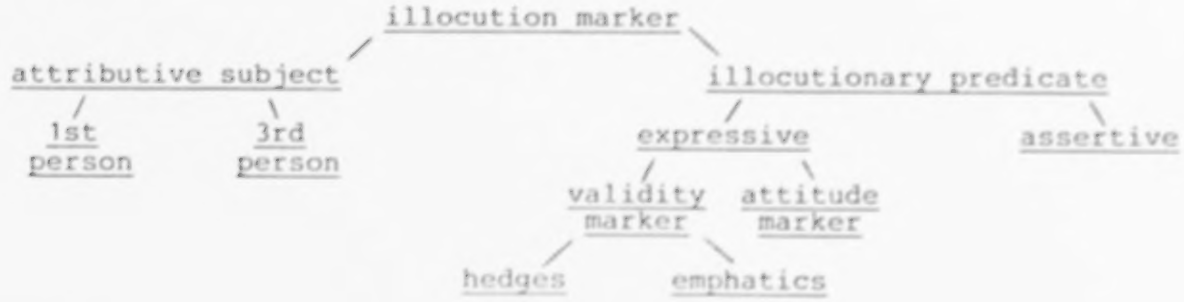

Fig. 4.

With this expansion, the model is able to describe three of the illocutionary acts implicit in Vande Kopple's model and to attribute those acts to either a first person or a third person subject. The Vande Kopple model allows first person narrators like "I would point out," while my revised model allows also third person narrators like "Smith points out." The Vande Kopple model allows first person attitude markers like "I find it surprising," while my model allows also "Jones finds it surprising." And the Vande Kopple model allows first person validity markers like "I doubt" and "I am certain," while my model allows also "James doubts" and "Susan is certain."

By making a categorical distinction between the person responsible for an illocutionary act and the act itself, my model provides a detailed description of the internal structure of illocution markers. And by raising illocution markers to a superordinate status, the model begins to establish a hierarchy among existing metadiscourse categories.

I should note that not all illocutionary content is conveyed through performative sentences; as Vande Kopple observes, attitude markers and validity markers can be conveyed through adverbs like "surprisingly" and "undoubtedly" (SEDOM 84). I would categorize both of these examples as "partially explicit metadiscourse," because neither attributes the metadiscourse to a speaker. However, it is possible to construct performative clauses that correspond to each of these adverbs--the expressives "I am surprised" and "I have no doubts." It seems then that partially explicit metadiscourse may be treated as a reduced form of fully explicit metadiscourse. If the partially explicit metadiscourse is well-formed, the reader should be able to recover the attributive subject. If it is ill-formed, like the agentless passive "high divorce rates have been observed to occur," then the person to whom the illocutionary act should be attributed is not recoverable.

My model is not comprehensive--further expansion of the "attributive subject" category to include second person subjects would be necessary to account for Vande Kopple's "commentary" category, and additional adjustments would be necessary to account for other categories from the existing models. However, my purpose in advancing an alternative model of metadiscourse is not to account for all of the categories in Williams and Vande Kopple's taxonomies; to do so would perpetuate the problem of grouping disparate

constituents under a common rubric. Instead, I am recommending that we limit the term "metadiscourse" to those constituents that convey illocutionary content, and that we reassign other constituents from the existing taxonomies to a different component of a comprehensive text model. By doing so, metadiscourse can become a clearly delineated category that functions within the larger context of speech act theory, thus allowing us to avail ourselves of the research that speech act theorists have been conducting for over thirty years and providing us with a principled framework in which to conduct our own studies.

Acknowledgements

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